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Pield

French, sixteenth century

Purchased, 1919, from the Hervey Edward Wetzel Fund

*Head of Virgin*

A Virgin and Child of the Fourteenth Century from Lorraine

A Pietà of the Sixteenth Century from Champagne

ONE of the most familiar subjects in Christian sculpture is that of the Virgin holding the infant Christ in her arms and seeming to present her offspring for the adoration of worshippers. The representation of a divine mother with her Child long antedates and goes far beyond Christianity. It was illustrated in ancient Egypt by images of Isis and the infant Horus, and has often been found in Buddhist representations of the fairy Hariti suckling her baby Pingala. As an image of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child the motive early began to appear in Europe, and in the twelfth century became frequent in the sculptured decoration of French cathedrals. Its use kept pace with the growing cult of the Virgin. St. Bernard's homilies and sermons in her honor date from the twelfth century. It was in the thirteenth century that the Angelus originated. When Gothic architecture replaced the Romanesque in France, about the year 1200, the image of the Virgin and Child came to take the prominent place which in the earlier style had been occupied by the figure of Christ. Among the first illustrations are the group over the right-hand north door of Chartres Cathedral dated about 1145, that over a north door of Bourges Cathedral, of about the same time, that above the sacristy door in Rheims Cathedral, executed shortly before 1200, and that above the right-hand portal of Notre Dame in Paris called the Doorway of St. Anne, executed shortly after 1200. In all of these groups the Virgin is represented crowned, veiled, wearing stately drapery and seated on a throne, generally in a niche or doorway of elaborate Romanesque design. It is easy to believe that the subject as so conceived may have had its origin in that of the Adoration of the Magi, a motive dating from the first Christian centuries, in which the Virgin offers the Child to the worship of three kneeling kings. A relief of the eleventh century over the door of Notre Dame du Port, at Clermont Ferrand in Auvergne, shows the Virgin already seated with the Child on her Romanesque throne,

as at Notre Dame in Paris a century later, but still holding audience with the three royal visitors. The Virgin at Rheims holds the Child on her right arm, the Virgin at Notre Dame, at Bourges and at Chartres holds him between her knees; but in other groups of about the same period the Child is transferred to the left knee, leaving the Virgin's right hand free to hold an emblem. Finally, a generation later, perhaps moved by the impulse which was transforming crouching Romanesque arches into soaring Gothic vaults, the Divine Mother, too, rose to her feet. In the doorway of Amiens and in other doorways at Notre Dame and at Rheims, she stands erect, holding the Child on her left arm as she stands in the group here illustrated; and the formal pose and drapery of the earlier statues has given place to the bending grace of the present figure.

The Virgin wears a plain tunic girt round the waist by a belt with a long end represented as studded with rosettes and bars. The border of the tunic lies on the ground, and the tips of her pointed shoes appear among its folds. A mantle of light drapery hangs about her shoulders, held by a thong that curves from edge to edge across her bosom, and is caught up in a little bunch over her left arm. A light veil is drawn over her head and hangs down her back. Upon it, instead of the crown customary in many of the groups, among them the earliest, she wears a close-fitting cap. Perhaps it was once surmounted by a metal crown.

The Child is enveloped in a loose mantle open at the breast, with wide, pointed lapels. He sits erect holding up a large flower, and seems absorbed in the flowering scepter from which he has picked it, and of which there now remains only a fragment in the Virgin's right hand. A twig with two leaves carved against the inside of the Virgin's wrist proves it to have been what the stump indicates, the representation of a small shrub. The eager bearing of the Child had become a tradition among the French *imagiers* of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and in other groups of that time is frequently expressed in the identical pose of the legs. The same life-like conception appears in the similar standing group executed in Padua soon after 1300 by Giovanni Pisano, all of whose sculptures show a Gothic angularity and intensity that betray their inspiration from France. A cast of the Paduan group is shown in the Renaissance Court. An alabaster statuette in the Museum Collection is one of the countless Madonnas due to Giovanni Pisano's initiative, and shows the Child in the same infantile pose.

The present group is said to have stood originally in the parish church of St. Goery in the little city of Epinal in Lorraine, on the western slope of the Vosges Mountains. Its date is given as the early fourteenth century. For both these suppositions there is good evidence. In the cloister of the Cathedral in the neighboring town of St. Dié, there is preserved a group which closely resembles this. It



Virgin and Child

French, fourteenth century

Purchased, 1919, from the Hervey Edward Wetzel Fund

is reproduced in the accompanying illustration. Indeed, the chief points of difference are only three: the Virgin's crown and her drapery, and the position of the arms of the Child. The open mantle of the Virgin in our group, showing the gown falling in quiet folds, is an exception among similar sculptures. The mantle of the St. Dié Virgin follows the usual custom and is drawn across her body; but she has the same curving pose as ours; she likewise treads on the edge of her long belted tunic, and her mantle is confined with the same thong curving across her bosom. Her hand is mutilated and empty, but likewise appears to have once held an upright emblem. She has the same curling hair and shallow-cut eyes, the same small mouth, the same somewhat flattened face and the same suggestions of a coming double chin. The Child has the same round head with close curling hair. He holds the same large flower, although instead of grasping it in both hands, he supports it on his knee with his left hand and stretches out his right arm as if to pick another. In sum the comparison conclusively indicates that the two groups are due to the same artistic influence, if not to the same hand.

The date given for the St. Dié group may be accepted on internal evidence for both. At the beginning of the fourteenth century French *imagiers* began to turn from the stately ideals developed in the cathedral porches of the thirteenth century and impressively illustrated in the "Beau Dieu" of Rheims, to a more human and portrait-like rendering of sacred subjects. We can easily imagine that this group and its counterpart at St. Dié were carved after living models. There is in this Virgin an amplitude of body, and a facial type that suggests a fair *bourgeoise* of Epinal or peasant from the neighboring fields; and the motive of the flower has all the air of being taken from the life of the city streets. Upon such an interpretation of the work, it is a document in the movement of the French spirit which was to bring the Renaissance out of the ages of the church.

A further stage in the humanization of divine themes is embodied in the group of the Virgin mourning the dead Christ, shown in the illustration on the first page. This subject, called "La Vierge de Pitié," or in Italian the "Pietà," is one of the latest in Christian art. The scene of the Entombment, showing a group of persons, among them the Virgin, laying away the body of Christ in the rock-tomb mentioned in the Bible, appears at least as early as the eleventh century; but the representation of the Virgin alone in grief over the body of Christ is rare by comparison, and awaited an age that dared to see in the sorrowing divinity of earlier times a human mother mourning her human son.

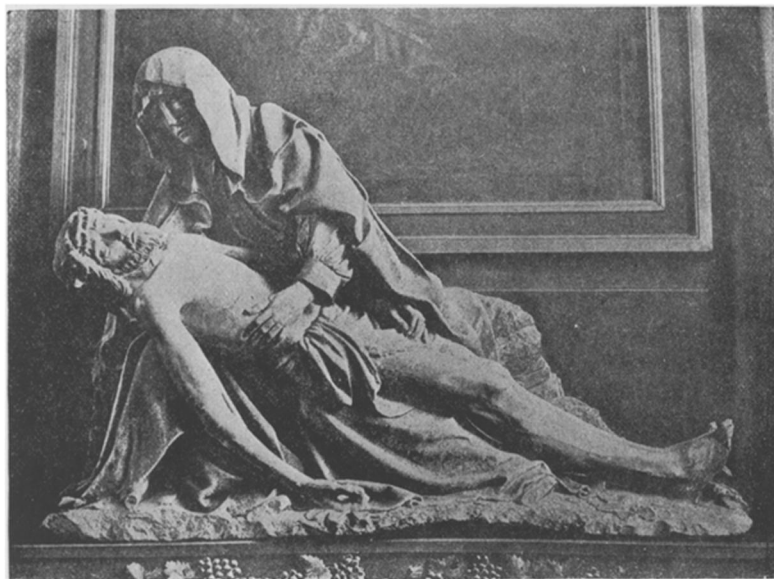
The Virgin is seated on a slanting bench of rock continuous with the background and holds on her knees the body of the dead Christ, nude excepting for the loin cloth, one end of which the Virgin gathers up under the body. She is clothed in a plain tunic cut round at the neck and with close-



Virgin and Child French, fourteenth century
From the Cloister of the Cathedral at St. Dié*

fitting sleeves after a fashion familiar in monuments of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. An enveloping mantle is drawn over her head and draped over her knees in rich folds. The only ornament carved on her clothing is the richly embroidered collar of the tunic, but over the whole relief there are remains of a thick coating of paint of different colors. The custom of painting sculpture was general in the Middle Ages and was not abandoned until late in the Renaissance. Long snaky locks stream backward from the head of Christ which still wears the crown of thorns. The hair of the Virgin is almost concealed under the deep hood which gives its strongest note of shadow and its strongest expressiveness to the relief. There is an evident effort on the sculptor's part to give to the features of the Virgin a vivid cast of sorrow. Her face is a narrow oval with delicately cut nose and markedly pointed chin, and betrays her pain in lifted brows and half-open lips. Her head bent at a sharp angle and her stiffly held arm with its rumpled sleeve reinforce the impression. There is an equally vivid delineation of painful death in the fallen head of Christ, in his gathered eyebrows and parted lips and in his stark legs, contorted trunk, awkward arms and helpless hands.

*From *Documents de Sculpture Française du Moyen Âge*. P. Vitry and G. Briere.



Pietà

French, sixteenth century

From the Church at Bayel*

Above, on either side of the Virgin's shoulders, two irregular panels contain two shields carved with armorial bearings. The loss of part of the right hand of Christ is the only injury to either figure.

The relief comes to the Museum attributed to the school of Champagne and dated in the fifteenth century. This provenance seems probable, but the sixteenth century seems in advance the more likely period; for Champagne was a battleground in the Hundred Years War, and during the fifteenth century offered little opportunity for the development of sculpture. In the church at Bayel, in the beautiful valley of the Aube in southern Champagne, named by St. Bernard in the eleventh century *Clara Vallis*, or Clairvaux, there is preserved the Pietà illustrated above. The group is one of the most notable among many Pietàs of the same period which exist in the region about Clairvaux, and are perhaps due to the influence of its abbey. It still preserves the original paint: the tunic of the Madonna black, her mantle blue with gold stars. The present relief is exceptional in following the Bayel Pietà more nearly than others do, both in the bending attitude of the Madonna and in the pose of the Christ, halfway between the straight rigidity of that group and the backward arch given the body where, as at Mussy and elsewhere, it rests on both the Madonna's knees. But the two breathe a different atmosphere, the present relief exhibiting a tension of feeling and sharpness of form which in the Bayel group are relaxed and softened. In our relief the Virgin has seized and half raised the body of Christ, and gazes as if to convince herself that He is dead. The Virgin at

Bayel holds the body gently and bends as if to kiss the face. The conception of our group might date it in the fourteenth century did not its execution, like that of the Bayel Pietà, suggest the sixteenth. The puzzle it presents seems to teach that a developed artistic technique may or may not be animated by a changed artistic spirit. The Bayel group is the more suave and less passionate counterpart of ours; presenting the Renaissance in its age of innocence as ours presents a Gothic grown conscious of itself. A head of Christ from Champagne, preserved in the Louvre, is also a milder rendering of this subject than the head in our relief.† But besides a general likeness, there are resemblances of detail between the two heads: the beard is treated as in our relief, and the make of the crown of thorns is the same. Both the Bayel group and the Louvre head are dated early in the sixteenth century; and our Pietà, which internal evidence clearly assigns also to the prolific workshops of southern Champagne, can hardly have been produced before that time.

A wood carving on a box cover of the sixteenth century preserved in the Cluny Museum may possibly be a derivative from our relief.‡ In general composition it stands between the Bayel group and our own, of which it reproduces small details also—the flowing hair of Christ and the tip of the Madonna's right foot beneath her drapery.

The shields in relief in panels on either side the present group indicate that it originally adorned a tomb; perhaps set in a niche to watch over a recumbent effigy or in the wall of a church above a pavement grave.

G.

*From *La Sculpture à Troyes . . . au Seizième Siècle*. R. Koechlin and J. J. Marquet de Vasselot.

† Illustrated in the *Gazette des Beaux Arts*. 3me. Per. T. 29, 1903 p. 307 (André Michel).

‡ Illustrated in the *Monographie du Musée de Cluny*, pl. 194.